

NATIONAL FASHION IDENTITIES OF THE INDIAN SARI

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ABSTRACT

Understanding the concept of national Fashion Identity is pertinent, before exploring the meaning of the National fashion identities of the Indian sari. According to Sandra Niessen, western dress went out into the world on the backs of missionaries, traders, colonial administrators, the military and their wives. The way they clad their 'civilized appearance' was inextricably blended with an associated set of behaviours related to hygiene and demeanour. She further states that in colonized society, success was signalled by the appearance of having adopted European norms. The retention of indigenous dress, particularly if it failed to cover bodily regions that European norms required to have covered, was considered an immediate sign of uncivilized primitiveness.

KEYWORDS: Modern Fashion, Materiality, National Identity, Post Modern

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INTRODUCTION

The influence of western fashion on the Indian Sari Fashions during the colonial times is visible two folds, one in terms of materiality where the French chiffons and laces were imported for the elite class. The use of these light weight saris led to the practice of attaching a strip of 6-8 inch wide fabric on the hem of the sari to enhance the fall/drape, and this led to the colloquial reference of this fabric strip as "Fall". (The traditional sari and draping styles do not require attachment of "the fall strip" due to their woven borders, hence ready to be worn once off the loom.) The second influence being the practice of wearing an undergarment; a frilly petticoat for obvious reasons of modesty and decoration too in most cases, and the transition from the traditional bodice, choli to Blouse became evident as stated by Ritu Kumar (2000), "Apart from their European extravaganzas. The royals also got together in the Calcutta season organized by the British. This was the melting pot of fashion and culture in India. All these multicultural exposures transformed their attires back home. The royal women retained their saris in India, however included more modest blouses and decent petticoats with them. The saris worn in the 20th century were of chiffon exported from Europe. This trend caught on with the entire royal clan. The flip side of this however was that it caused a crisis that decreased their patronage to the high-skilled weavers. The Rajputs continued to wear the cholis but added a kurti over it. The choli got transformed into the blouse of today in a step by step transformation. The choli that ended at the bust line lengthened to cover more area, the backless cholis got their backs, the kasanis or tie-cords were replaced by hooks or buttons in the front, the ethnic fabric of blouses became more sophisticated and either complemented or supplemented the sari."

In her paper on "Interpreting Civilizations through Dress ", Sandra Niessen states , "the conviction that it is possible to discern a person's development from his or her appearance is a seductive delusion that has shaped

conceptions of European fashion. Mahatma Gandhi learned this in the beginning of the twentieth century as he experimented with dress to construct identity. He began by adapting his dress for membership in British society, only to have it impressed upon him in unpleasant ways, that such trappings cannot cover up the deeper, inconvertible hierarchical distinctions of race and skin color. He then opted to wear his indigenous clothing, even while visiting England, as a way of insisting upon the legitimacy of his own nation and culture. There are many instances on record of indigenous antifashion being used to signify resistance to the superiority and dominance of European colonial power; the power of dress to convey political messages is obvious.”

The impact of the “Swadeshi” (produced in own country) movement was adoption of home-spun “Khadi” fabric for the freedom fighter; representing the socio political affiliation towards nationalist agenda. The Nivi style drape or the Modern drape of sari which shows the transition from traditional, regional sari drape to more modern draping style, had a unifying effect and further created a national dress code for women joining the mainstream freedom struggle. Never before was clothing style so evidently significant, as in the non- cooperative, nonviolent Indian freedom(1930-1947 AD.) struggle across the world history. This modern style of draping the sari was a neutral innovation to the regional sari draping style: the Nivi sari style conceived by Gyanodanandini Tagore (Nobel Laureate, poet Rabindranath Tagore’s sister-in-law) went on to become a national dress for Indian women from late 19th century till date, a classic example of unity in diversity.

Toby Slade, in his case study on Japan, argues that modernity actually stimulates tradition, for in modernity progress is constantly sought, yet constantly questioned, undermined and remodeled. Modernity, he says everywhere repeatedly clothes itself in reconstructions of the past, recreating a national costume and inventing national traditions to authenticate the very idea of the nation itself. Simultaneously, the significance of place increases with globalization because it represents a threat due to the speed and flexibility with which ideologies and goods flow across national boundaries

The Nivi Sari, co- ordinated with the blouse and petticoat also continues till date as a uniform for hospitality industry, Government agencies like police etc. and a dress code for workwear and formal settings, also an Indian example for power dressing. Popularized by Mrs. Indira Gandhi when was elected as the first woman prime minister of India in 1966. Indian women took great inspiration from the way she carried herself in a minimal, prim handloom sari & short hairstyle, an example of power dressing (Fig.5).According to Mukulika. B. & Daniel. M. , ‘this provided the foundation for the adoption of the sari as a symbol of India itself. This association was cemented when, under the guidance of that consummate politician, Mrs. Gandhi, the sari for a while became central to the construction of a visual image of India both internally and abroad. This nationalist appropriation of the sari was confirmed in the popular mind by Mrs. Gandhi’s triumphant visits to the USA in 1970s, which many women still recall’.

A Postmodern person is presented with the opportunity to continually re-invent oneself and to shape and perform identifying multiple ways. She is able to construct style free from semiotic historical associations; a form of historical ‘play’. She is also able to use irony to critique dominant codes. At times has no sense of understanding of history or true meaning due to continual pastiche of the past. The destruction of modernity’s meta- narratives leaves space for new previously marginalized groups to have a voice. And especially in case of Indian women who were sidelined from mainstream, have now found new opportunities to reshape their individual and national identities befitting the professional roles they have taken up.

CONCLUSIONS

With more Indian women experiencing socio- economic emancipation the Nivi sari transcends into its post modern avatar in terms of materiality and innovations and dimensions, where the designers have referenced the traditional craft techniques or draping styles like Sabyashachi's Chotu Sari, Wendell Rodricks' Kunbi Sari, or Shilpa Chauhan's deconstructed sari, Keith Khan's neo sporty Knitted saris. The Times of India, dated 21 Jan 2012, featured debate over whether there is any reason for treating the sari as a sacrosanct piece of clothing versus mutilation of elegant apparel like the sari is an assault on Indian sartorial aesthetics. Saris that can be worn over trousers or jeans and pleated knee length "sarinis" are picking up in popularity, citing the demands of contemporary lifestyle, which have made the six yards garment cumbersome for many women. Yet there are many women who believe that turning a sari into a "cool" sarini will diminish its appeal. Sari expert, RTA Kapur Chisti during the Offline conversations on "Essence of the Sari", mentioned that dress is never a moral question, its an individual's interpretation. The Sari has certainly undergone many makeovers since ancient times; it indeed is worth determining how the sari shall reinvent itself for the post modern Indian woman.

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